

THE INTELLIGENCE OF SENSE: RANCIÈRE'S AESTHETICS

Colin McQuillan (University of Tennessee Knoxville)

In this paper, I argue that Jacques Rancière does not propose a purely sensible conception of the aesthetic in his recent writings on art. Unlike many contemporary philosophies of art, Rancière's aesthetics retains an important cognitive dimension. Here, I bring this aspect of Rancière's aesthetics into view by comparing the conception of intelligence found in his earlier works with his more recent writings on art, showing that intelligence and sense are distributed in the same ways. The distinction between them is, moreover, governed by the same politics. Rancière's analysis of the sensible and the intellectual breaks down the distinction between them and establishes their equality.

1. Introduction

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel called his course on the philosophy of art “Lectures on Aesthetics” (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1820–29). Yet he began his lectures with an apology, explaining why he thought his title was inappropriate. “Aesthetics,” Hegel says, “means more precisely the science of sensation or feeling.”¹ “Thus understood,” he continued, “it arose as a new science, or rather as something that was to become a branch of philosophy for the first time, in the school of Wolff, in an epoch when works of art were being considered in Germany in the light of the feelings which they were supposed to evoke—feelings of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, etc.” (ILA, 3) It was this emphasis on sensation and feeling (*Empfindungen*), so characteristic of eighteenth-century reflections on art, that Hegel found so objectionable in aesthetics.

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, (tr.) B. Bosanquet (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 3. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ILA. Rancière discusses Hegel's rejection of the name “aesthetics” (*Ästhetik*) in Jacques Rancière, “What Aesthetics Can Mean,” (tr.) B. Holmes, in *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art, and the Senses*, (ed.) P. Osborne (London: The Serpent's Tail, 2000), 18. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WACM.

Because it places such unwarranted emphasis on sensation and feeling, Hegel contends that aesthetics fails to see that it is “spirit” (*Geist*) that elevates the fine arts and makes them worthy of philosophical consideration. (ILA, 4) For that reason, art is merely “an imperfect, incomplete mode of being” for aesthetics, which does not recognise the beautiful as “partaking in this higher element and as created thereby.” (ILA, 4) It is only by recognising the fine arts as expressions of spirit that Hegel thinks a philosophy of art becomes possible. Because he defines the philosophy of art as “consideration of art by means of thought” and the attempt “to ascertain scientifically what art is,” he shifts the philosophy of art away from aesthetic questions of sensation and feeling toward a theoretical account of the ontology of the work of art. (ILA, 13)

Although Hegel believed that “thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art,” debates that set the ontology of the artwork against aesthetics continued to rage throughout the twentieth century. (ILA, 12) Only recently have these debates shown signs of coming to an end. Arthur Danto, who acknowledges “the dreariness of aesthetics” and claims, with Duchamp, that “aesthetic delectation [is] the danger to be avoided,” has announced the exhaustion of inquiries regarding the ontology of the artwork that followed the appearance of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (1964) and the breakdown of the distinction between ordinary objects and works of art.² In the wake of these developments, some have sought to shift the focus of the philosophy of art back to aesthetics. What is at stake for the new aesthetics, however, is not merely the sense and feeling for beauty. Sensibility, the passions, the body, and materiality in general are all claimed for aesthetics. Indeed, aesthetics now seems to embrace everything that is not intellectual. It has become, in effect, an alternative to the cognitive and theoretical bias of philosophy in general and the philosophy of art in particular.³

² Arthur Danto, “Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art,” in *Humanities*, vol. 4, n. 1 (1983), 1–2. See also Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

³ As examples of this tendency, I would refer readers to the concept of “somaesthetics,” developed in Richard Shusterman’s *Body Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). While there are important differences between these works and many other works that de-

Jacques Rancière occupies a unique and difficult position within these debates. Artists, aestheticians and philosophers have shown a great deal of interest in Rancière's work, yet he stands apart from their debates, in many respects crafting a discourse that is very much his own.⁴ It is clear, however, that Rancière has much in common with contemporary developments in aesthetics, which emphasise the sensible rather than the intellectual in art. The central theme of Rancière's many writings on art and politics is "the distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), which Rancière defines as "the sensible system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."⁵ This definition may at first seem impenetrable, but it soon gives way to a clear and extraordinarily reasonable way of thinking about art. The distribution of the sensible describes the arrangement of the conditions that delimit what may or may not be seen, heard and spoken about. These conditions constitute the meaning of the work of art and the way in which members of the community are counted as political subjects. In other words, because it is possible to see something as a work of art and to regard a person as a certain kind of subject, it is possible to understand them as such.

Like Foucault, Rancière regards the distribution of the sensible as a historical rather than transcendental condition of sense.⁶ Also like Foucault, he sees the distribution of the sensible as a political configuration, which allows certain conceptions of sense to become visible within particular networks of power. In order to free the distribution of the sensible from the inequality that has characterised these arrangements in the

velop similar themes, they share a broadly anti-cognitive and non-discursive conception of the aesthetic, which, I hope to show, is not to be found in Rancière.

⁴ On the relevance of Rancière's work for contemporary debates in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, see Joseph Tanke, "Why Rancière Now?" *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 44, n. 2 (2010), 1–17.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (ed. and tr.) G. Rockhill (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 12. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DS.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, "The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (ed. and tr.) G. Rockhill (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 50–52.

past, Rancière rejects what he calls “the autonomy of free reason, subduing the anarchy of sensation.”⁷ For him, the elevation of the intellectual above the sensible is indicative of a philosophical politics, which defines sense as the other of thought and makes the sensible subservient to the intellectual. Rancière never ceases to denounce the hierarchies and inequalities that characterise these politics, but it would be wrong to suggest that he shares the anti-intellectualism that marks so much of contemporary aesthetics.

By examining the significance of intelligence and the intellectual in Rancière’s early writings, and noting continuities with his more recent writings on aesthetics, I hope to show that aesthetics need not abandon the intellectual in order to break down the hierarchy that subordinates the sensible to the intellectual in the philosophy of art. The equality and even, perhaps, the lack of distinction of the sensible and the intellectual that is to be found in Rancière’s aesthetics holds open the possibility of a more sensible intelligence and more intelligent sensibility. I contend that philosophers of art should do everything in their power to realise that possibility instead of indulging in the anti-intellectual fantasy of a purely sensible aesthetics becoming pervasive today.

2. Intellectuals and Intelligence

The role of the intellectual was much debated during Rancière’s formative years. These debates were particularly heated in France, where Rancière was educated and where he began his academic career. A clear understanding of the intelligence that distinguishes the intellectual from others was, however, often lost in the polemics that raged between existentialists, structuralists and Marxists. An intellectual is an intellectual by virtue of his intelligence, yet intelligence is also something to which the intellectual lays claim in order to distinguish himself from others. By examining the object of that claim and its politics, Rancière was able to raise the discussion of the intellectual to a new level in his early works.⁸

⁷ Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, (ed. and tr.) S. Corcoran (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2010), 117. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ARO.

⁸ See Jacques Rancière, “*La légende des philosophes*,” in *Les Scènes du Peuple*:

Rancière's earliest reflections on the intellectual are marked by the thought of Louis Althusser. One of the participants in Althusser's famous "Reading Capital" seminar at the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1965, Rancière, in a paper he delivered there, took up a question Althusser had addressed in a series of articles around the same time.⁹ Even at this early stage, Rancière's concern with questions of intelligence is evident, for he considers how *Capital* became a "scientific" critique of political economy.¹⁰ Science was necessarily a theoretical undertaking for Althusser because it confronted the theoretical practices which constitute bourgeois ideology with "scientific knowledge of the totality of the existing bourgeois system, its politico-economic as well as its ideological systems."¹¹ Rancière makes use of a similar conception of science when he says that Marx's critique of political economy is scientific because its starting point is not determined by bourgeois ideology. (CC/CPE, 103–52) By taking scientific knowledge as its starting point and drawing a dividing line between "true ideas and false ideas," the scientific critique of capital distinguishes itself from ideology and confers upon itself the authority of one who knows.¹²

Rancière broke with Althusser in 1968, denouncing his teacher's theoreticism as an affront to the intelligence of workers. For Rancière,

Les Révoltes Logiques, 1975/1985 (Lyon: Horlieu, 2001), 285–310. See also Alain Badiou, "The Lessons of Jacques Rancière : Knowledge and Power after the Storm," (tr.) Tzuchien Tho, in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, (ed.) Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 30–54.

⁹ Louis Althusser, "The 1844 Manuscripts of Karl Marx," in *For Marx*, (tr.) B. Brewster (New York: Verso, 1996), 155–62.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, "The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy," (tr.) B. Brewster, in *Ideology, Method, and Marx*, (ed.) A. Rattansi (New York: Routledge, 1989), 74–75, 99–103. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CC/CPE.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, "Theory, Theoretical Practice, and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," (tr.) J. H. Kavanagh, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, (ed.) G. Elliott (New York: Verso, 1990), 4.

¹² Louis Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon: Interview conducted by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (tr.) B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 8.

the events that transpired in France in May of that year were fatal to the kind of inquiry undertaken by Althusser and the participants in the “Reading Capital” seminar.¹³ At the beginning of *The Lesson of Althusser* (1974), Rancière writes that Althusserianism “died on the barricades of May, along with many other ideas of the past.”¹⁴ Because those events revealed the people’s capacity for political self-determination, Rancière concluded that the people did not need to be guided by the dogmas that had dominated Marxist theory since Lenin and which found their most extreme expression in Althusser’s conception of Marxist philosophy as a theoretical science. (ME, 788) The objections Rancière raised against Althusser’s theoreticism did not, however, lead him to reject intelligence as such. Rancière merely denied that the workers needed to be led to class-consciousness by those whose theoretical formations had been approved by a would-be philosopher-king. He insisted that the workers were perfectly capable of thinking for themselves and arriving at an awareness of their own conditions. To deny workers this degree of intelligence was, for Rancière, a political act that was by no means innocent. (ME, 806)

In the years that followed his break with Althusser, Rancière struggled to define an alternative politics. His association with the *Revolt Logiques* collective suggests that he continued to think there was an important place for intelligence in that politics. Instead of affirming the thrill-seeking adventurism of many young radicals who saw politics as a kind of extreme sport, or waxing sentimental about the suffering of the poor and the oppressed, as many of the “New Philosophers” of his generation were inclined to do, Rancière and his colleagues began to develop an account of the “logic” of the relation between the workers and

¹³ Jacques Rancière, “*Mode d’emploi pour une reedition de Lire le Capital*,” *Les Temps Modernes* 328 (1973), 788. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ME. When it was published in *Les Temps Modernes*, Rancière’s essay was preceded by a “warning” (*avertissement*) explaining the circumstances under which *Reading Capital* was being reissued, as well as why his contribution had been removed from it and why his criticism of the project was necessary. This warning is not included in Jacques Rancière, “How to use *Lire le Capital*,” (tr.) T. Asad, in *Ideology, Method, and Marx*, (ed.) A. Rattansi (New York: Routledge, 1989), 181–89.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, *La leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 10.

their political representatives.¹⁵ Their inquiries were intended, in the words of Kristin Ross, “to disrupt or interrogate the epistemological categories and representations that serve to ground historical discourse, particularly the discourse which, like that of social history, sets out to tell the story of the privileged other of political modernity: the worker.” (M68A, 124) Rancière’s contributions to *Revoltes Logiques* (1975–85) sought to expose the image of the worker as the “unconscious philosopher” (*philosophe inconnu*) whose maturity and self-consciousness lag behind the reality of his situation, an image, produced by intellectuals seeking to represent the workers’ movement, that grafts a fiction onto the worker.¹⁶ By taking it upon themselves to think and speak for workers, however, these same intellectuals rendered the voices of the workers mute (*muette*). Rancière and *Revoltes Logiques* sought to present an alternative history that would let the silenced voice of the worker speak. (M68A, 128–31)

In the principle thesis for his *doctor d’etat*, published as *The Nights of Labor* in 1981, Rancière contests the intellectuals’ image of the worker on empirical and historical grounds. While a great deal of attention has been paid to Rancière’s analysis of the artistic and literary productions of workers—the poetry and journals they produced and published in their time away from work—it is important to note that Rancière found it necessary to suspend “the ancestral hierarchy subordinating those dedicated to manual labor to those who have been given the privilege of thinking” and “open the field, for once, to the thinking of those not destined to think.”¹⁷ For Rancière, workers’ poetry became something more than a mere extension of the time of production or an excess of workers’ labour power. By writing and presenting poetry to the public, workers were able to take part in a life which was denied to people who worked with their hands, even by their own political representatives in the labour movement—the life of the mind. French worker-

¹⁵ See Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 158–81. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as M68A.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, “*Le Prolétaire et son Double, ou Le Philosophe Inconnu*,” in *Les Scènes du Peuple: Les Révoltes Logiques, 1975/1985* (Lyon: Horlieu, 2001), 21–33.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, (tr.) J. Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), vii–xii. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as NL.

poets in the 19th century consequently became, for Rancière, “nighttime philosophers invading the terrain of serious thinking.” (NL, x)

Rancière extended his criticism of Althusser’s theoreticism to Plato, Marx, Sartre and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983) in order to expose the philosophical tradition which gave rise to the image of the worker as the “unconscious philosopher.” While Bourdieu had purportedly revealed the social mechanisms that reproduced privilege and perpetuated class hierarchies in education, Rancière averred that he merely replaced the authority of the intellectual in the philosophical tradition with sociological determinism. The difference was negligible, Rancière charged, for they produced the same effect. Both philosophy and sociology denied that workers and the poor were capable of the understanding that belonged to the upper classes; both insisted that workers act according to their station. Bourdieu may have exposed the means through which these ends were achieved, but in doing so, he reaffirmed their necessity. Because he had shown how even the most emancipatory pedagogies reproduced the privilege that belonged to the rich, Bourdieu had, in effect, denied the poor the means with which to contest their social position. And, what is more, he had only presented his findings to those who would take comfort from them. What would happen, Rancière wondered, if Bourdieu’s investigations made their way to the workers?¹⁸

Rancière returned to the archives in his next work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), in order to answer this question. The work that emerged from this investigation contains his most extended and explicit defence of intellectual equality. The words “understanding” and “intelligence” appear on nearly every page, as Rancière recounts the radical pedagogy of Joseph Jacotot and the intellectual achievements of his students. By focussing on Jacotot, Rancière sought to refute the “pedagogical myth” that distinguishes between “knowing minds and ignorant ones” and “an inferior intelligence and a superior one.”¹⁹ According to the ex-

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, (tr.) A. Parker, et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 179–84. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PP.

¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, (tr.) K. Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 6–7. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as IS.

plicative order that maintains this myth, students possess an inferior intelligence, while the master possesses a superior intelligence. The master must possess a superior intelligence, for he explicates the material students are to learn. The assumption, of course, is that the students do not possess the intelligence that would allow them to comprehend the material on their own. The fact that Jacotot's students were able to learn what their master could not teach, however, suggests something shocking for both philosophers and sociologists, namely, that "all men have equal intelligence." (IS, 18) For Rancière, the work of intellectual emancipation turns on the recognition of this intelligence and the practice of intellectual equality that is at work in Jacotot's radical pedagogy.²⁰

This survey of Rancière's intellectual itinerary has covered ground that is no doubt familiar to many of his readers. Most of what I have said is not new. Yet I have emphasised something few others seem to have noticed in these works. Rancière's constant emphasis on intelligence, his questioning of hierarchies that affirm the right of one class to think and deny that right to another, as well as his rejection of theoretical and scientific discourses which subordinate the intellectual capacities of the people to those of their representatives, spokesmen and leaders—all of these indicate a consistent focus on the distribution of intelligence and the possibility of intellectual equality.

3. Aesthetics and the Sensible

The turn to aesthetics in Rancière's recent works is unsurprising when one considers the role art and literature played in *The Nights of Labor* and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.²¹ The confrontation he stages between Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979) at

²⁰ The phrase "intellectual emancipation" belongs to the subtitle of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which contains "five lessons in intellectual emancipation." Kristin Ross has provided an admirable analysis of the practices of equality in Rancière, though she does not pursue the intriguing idea of a practice of "intellectual" equality at any great length. See Kristin Ross, "Rancière and the Practice of Equality," *Social Text* 29 (1991), 66–70.

²¹ One could also cite the literary preoccupations of Rancière's works from the 1990s, including *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (1990), *The Names of History* (1992), *Mallarmé* (1996), *Mute Speech* (1998) and *The Flesh of Words* (1998).

the end of *The Philosopher and His Poor* likewise suggests that Rancière afforded aesthetic experience a privileged place, even in works not specifically devoted to the arts. What is surprising, however, is the shift in emphasis that seems to have taken place in Rancière's more recent writings. Rancière no longer treats art, poetry and aesthetic experience as indications of intelligence. While his early works treated workers' poetry as philosophical invasions of "the terrain of serious thinking," he has more recently focussed on the configurations of sense (*sens*) and the distribution of the sensible (*sensible*) that are found in different regimes of art. (NL, x) Does this mean he has abandoned the intellectual for the sensible?

Before jumping to such a hasty conclusion, it should be noted that this turn to the sensible is bound up with developments in contemporary French philosophy, just as his reflections on intelligence were motivated by debates concerning science, theory and pedagogy that took place around Sartre, Althusser and Bourdieu. In the aftermath of those debates, French philosophy reoriented itself toward ethics and aesthetics, where sensibility remains an important theme. In *Otherwise than Being* (1974), for example, Emmanuel Levinas used sensibility to counter the subjectivism and idealism of phenomenological intentionality, calling sensibility "vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for all the others...pushed to the limit."²² This conception of the sensible appealed to Levinas because it stresses unconditional openness to the other. This openness, in turn, defined "the ethics of ethics" for Levinas, as well as for Jean-François Lyotard, who appropriated Levinas' conception of the sensible for aesthetics in *The Inhuman* (1989). Sensibility became, for Lyotard, "the law of the other," whose sublime exteriority imposes itself on thought.²³ Modern art is merely a witness to the "disaster" of that ex-

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, (tr.) A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 15, 61–64.

²³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, (tr.) G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 135. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as InH. The phrase "law of the other" is from Rancière, who uses it to indicate the relation between the ethical and the aesthetic in Lyotard.

perience, for Lyotard, because it is unable to represent the fundamental difference and otherness of the sensible, which exceeds the power of the imagination. (InH, 136–38) According to Rancière, Lyotard’s aesthetics is a perfect example of how “aesthetics has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning.”²⁴

Instead of revelling in our exposure to the other and mourning the impossibility of representation, Rancière attempts to renew the promise of emancipation in his aesthetics. To the extent that it concerns emancipation, this promise is no doubt political; yet it is also sensible, insofar as the promise of emancipation is to be realised in a particular configuration of sense. Rancière calls that configuration “aesthetics.” His meditations on sense have focussed on “the very meaning of what is designated by the term aesthetics,” because Rancière believes the “aesthetic revolution” has broken apart the distinctions and hierarchies that characterise other ways of doing and making, seeing and hearing, and so forth. (DS, 9) His analyses of the distribution of the sensible and the different regimes of art should be understood to highlight the emancipatory potential of aesthetics and the aesthetic regime of art rather than art in general, because it is aesthetics, and not art, that is constituted by dissensus and the practice of equality.²⁵ Art can be constructed in many different ways, but aesthetics opens up the space of possibility, a space denied by Lyotard and others taken with the morbid enthusiasm for impossibility that dominated so much of European philosophy during the 1980s and 1990s.

Rancière distinguishes between two different conceptions of aesthetics in the course of his investigations. In *The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000), he discusses a more general conception of aesthetics, argu-

See Jacques Rancière, “Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: A Counter-Reading of Kant,” in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (tr.) S. Corcoran (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 88–105.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, Foreword to “The Distribution of the Sensible,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (ed. and tr.) G. Rockhill (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 9. See also Jacques Rancière, “The Ethical Turn in Aesthetics and Politics,” in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (tr.) S. Corcoran (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 109–32.

²⁵ On the relation between dissensus and equality in aesthetics, see Joseph Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum Publishing, forthcoming).

ing that the distribution of the sensible constitutes a “primary aesthetics” (*esthétique première*), which can be understood “in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.” (DS, 13) While his reference to “*a priori* forms” of sense experience may be reminiscent of the transcendental aesthetic of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), Rancière makes it clear that the forms to which he refers are sensible rather than transcendental. The *a priori* forms of sense experience constitute, for Rancière, “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise,” which determine “what is seen and what can be said about it...who has the ability to see and the talent to speak...the properties of space and the possibilities of time.” (DS, 13) All of these capacities—visibility, audibility, the intelligibility of speech—are sensible qualities to the extent that they are assigned to particular times and places. Their distribution and arrangement are also sensible because they shape the social and historical contexts we use to interpret the configurations of sense that we encounter. In the arts, for example, different distributions of the sensible constitute different regimes of art, which are governed by different politics.

Rancière has written extensively about the ways in which sense is restricted and regulated by the different regimes of art, but it is the distribution of the sensible that characterises the aesthetic regime of art that is his main concern. And it is in this context that Rancière begins to examine the relation between the sensible and the intellectual in greater depth. In an essay entitled “What Aesthetics Can Mean” (2000), for example, he argues that the aesthetic regime of art emerged with “a shift in the conceptual status of the sensible and of the idea of thought.” (WACM, 19) Classical poetics considered art to be a form of imitation, so that the sensible in art came to be seen as a representation of an idea. For that reason, the sensible in art was compelled to correspond to its idea, producing “a sensible element that verifies the power of thought immanent to the sensible.” (WACM, 21) Rancière argues that romantic aesthetics distinguishes itself from this distribution of the sensible by making sense “the presentation of an in-sensible which, strictly speaking, is the thought of thought.” (WACM, 19) This claim is no doubt obscure, but it expresses what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the relation between the sensible and the intellectual in Romantic aesthetics. Because the sensible in art is not merely an imitation, Rancière maintains,

the sensible becomes “the place where thought comes to the sensible and where the sensible comes to thought.” (WACM, 19) The place of art then becomes “the place of the adequation between a sensible different from itself and a thought different from itself, a thought identical to non-thought.” (WACM, 19)

Rancière presents a slightly different account of the emergence of the aesthetic regime of art in *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (2001), which further complicates the relation between the sensible and the intellectual. *The Aesthetic Unconscious* is primarily concerned with Freud’s appropriation of the Oedipus myth, but it contrasts the conception of the aesthetic developed by Baumgarten and Kant with the view of the sensible found in Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel and the Schlegels in order to reveal the aesthetic presuppositions that guided the development of psychoanalysis. Instead of being regarded as “a lesser form of knowledge,” subordinated to the “greatness” of the intellect, Rancière argues that sense became “the thought of that which does not think” in the works of the German Idealists and Romantics.²⁶ The development of romantic aesthetics is, for that reason, an “aesthetic revolution” that “marks a transformation of the regime of thinking about art.” (AU, 7) Rancière finds this revolution compelling because it disrupts the hierarchies which characterise the distributions of the sensible in the ethical and poetic regimes of art. The way in which Rancière characterises this revolution is, however, different from the account he presented in *What Aesthetics Can Mean* in significant ways. Instead of seeing aesthetics as an attempt to reconcile “pure sensible presence and the invisible of thought,” Rancière praises the aesthetic revolution for affirming sense as “the thought that does not think” (*la pensée qui ne pense pas*). (AU, 31–32)

For the aesthetic regime of art, the sensible is not merely the absence of thought or a defective way of thinking. As “the thought that does not think,” the sensible becomes a positive “non-thought” (*non-pensée*), marking thought with the “efficacious presence” (*présence efficace*) of its opposite. (AU, 32) While this might suggest an inversion of the privilege Hegel affords to spirit in his philosophy of art, Rancière, unlike Levinas and Lyotard, does not fetishise the otherness of the sensi-

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, (tr.) D. Keates and J. Swenson (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 6. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AU.

ble. Nor does he treat the sensible as the sign of an incomprehensible exteriority. The sensible is simply what it is possible to see, to say and to understand. Because sense is “extricated from its ordinary connections” in the aesthetic regime of art, however, Rancière thinks aesthetics comes to express “a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, *logos* identical with *pathos*, the intention of the unintentional, etc.”²⁷ The sensible, in other words, undermines any attempt to distinguish sense from its opposite and liberates art from “any specific rule” and “any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres” in the aesthetic regime of art. (AR, 24)

In *The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes* (2002), Rancière argues that the “specific sensory experience” of aesthetics embodies “the promise of a new art and a new life” precisely because it permits the constant reconfiguration of the sensible in ways that are not beholden to any given order. (ARO, 115) It is worth noting, however, that Rancière does not mention “the art of thinking” when he says that the emancipatory promise of aesthetics is to be found in the conjunction of “the art of the beautiful” and “the art of living.” (ARO, 116–17) The absence of any reference to “the art of thinking” in *The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes*, as well as the growing distance between the sensible and the intellectual in his ’s recent work on aesthetics, can be taken as an indication of the distance between Rancière ’s earlier works on intellectual emancipation and his later reflections on the distribution of the sensible. This, in turn, might be taken to suggest that intelligence is reducible to “the free power of autonomous reason” and its attempts to “subdue the anarchy of sensation.” (ARO, 117)

4. The Intelligence of Sense

If Rancière has come to see the intellectual as nothing more than “the free power of autonomous reason” that subordinates the sensible to the representation of ideas and forces it to adhere to abstract ethical stan-

²⁷ Jacques Rancière, “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (tr.) G. Rockhill. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 22–23. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AR.

dards, then his work could be said to belong to the anti-cognitive and non-discursive tendency that has become so prominent in contemporary aesthetics. There are, however, several questions that must be answered before Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art can be used to reinforce the distinction between the sensible and the intellectual.

The question of language: Why would Rancière call the sensible "the thought of thought" and "the thought that does not think" if the sensible were not also intellectual?

The question of identity: If the sensible can be understood as a kind of thought or a way of thinking, then what is the specific difference between the sensible and the intellectual? Is the difference between the sensible and the intellectual a difference of quality, quantity or modality? Is the distinction essential or nominal, absolute or relative?

The question of relation: What kind of relation exists between the sensible and the intellectual, if they are, in fact, distinct? How can any relation between the sensible and the intellectual be maintained when the sensible undermines every "ordered set" of relations in the aesthetic regime of art?

The political question: What does it mean to distinguish the sensible and the intellectual? Who stands to gain by asserting and maintaining this distinction? How does it delimit what one is able to see, hear and say? Whom does this distinction exclude and on what grounds?

The answers to these questions will, I think, confirm that the sensible and the intellectual are not to be distinguished in Rancière's aesthetics. Rancière makes use of the language of the sensible because it is possible to think, speak and write about the aesthetic in those terms. It is no doubt appropriate to address aesthetics in terms of the sensible, but the appropriateness of one way of thinking, speaking and writing does not exclude the possibility of others. One could translate the language of the sensible into the language of intellect if one were so inclined, even in the context of aesthetics. This is, in effect, what Rancière is doing when he describes the sensible in terms of "the thought of thought" and "the thought that does not think."

The apparent contradiction of describing sense as both "the thought of thought" and "the thought that does not think" suggests that Rancière answers the question of identity in ways that render the sensible and the intellectual indistinct. Instead of clearly defining the sensible and insisting upon its singularity, Rancière undermines any conception of the

specificity of sense. By associating the sensible with locutions such as “the thought of thought” and “the thought of the unthought,” he obscures what is sensible about sense and transports our understanding of the sensible into another register. The non-identity of the sensible thus renders the relation between the sensible and the intellectual undecidable. Because they are discernible, the sensible and the intellectual are not identical; yet there is no specific difference between them that can be used to define their relation. The identity of the sensible and the intellectual and the relation between them is, in the end, ambiguous.

By undermining the identity of the sensible and the decidability of the relation between the sensible and the intellectual, Rancière does what he says the aesthetic regime of art does to the ethical and poetic regimes of art. He undermines the ordered set of relations that make the distinction between the sensible and the intellectual meaningful. And he does so because the politics of that distinction are a politics of inequality. To be sure, the politics of the distinction between the sensible and the intellectual is not a politics of inequality because of the distinction between them. Distinctions and their corresponding differences do not necessarily imply inequality. The politics of the distinction between the sensible and the intellectual is a politics of inequality because sense and intelligence are distributed in ways that establish hierarchies and privileges. Hegel’s philosophy of art privileges the thought of art over the sensations and feelings that works of art evoke. The inverse is true of contemporary aesthetics. By privileging the sensible and excluding the intellectual from aesthetic experience, contemporary aesthetics denies the significance and validity of thought, reflection and discourse, which even Hume acknowledged to be essential components of aesthetic experience.²⁸

Rancière’s early works help us to see that intelligence is distributed in the same ways and through the same processes that sense is distributed in aesthetics. The claim that intelligence does not belong exclusively to one party, that it is not to be brought to bear on some problems and ought not to be used in particular contexts, is a political claim that is by no means innocent. The same is true of arguments about the nature of art and the distribution of the sensible in aesthetics. Here, too, a certain

²⁸ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., (ed.) P.H. Nidditch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 173.

politics delimits what it is possible to see, to say and to understand. The virtue of Rancière's work lies in its continuous analysis of the politics that characterises those distributions and in its consistent critique of any arrangement that limits the possibility of sensible and intellectual emancipation. Instead of privileging one term over another, Rancière helps us to free ourselves from the authority of any particular term and to explore different ways of seeing and thinking.

cmcquillan@utk.edu